The University of Chicago

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1909–1914

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE
SOCIAL SCIENCES IN CANDIDACY FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
1939

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RUSSO-GERMAN RELATIONS, 1909-1914

There was considerable strain in the relations of Russia and Germany in 1909 because of the crisis of the preceding months over the Austrian annexation of the Turkish provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. A. P. Izvolsky, the Russian foreign minister, had been willing to consent to this annexation if Count Aehrenthal, the Austro-Hungarian foreign minister, would assist him in his desire to change the status of the Straits. But Izvolsky's own government refused to support him in his consent to the Austrian annexation of Slavic territory; the minister, therefore, found it necessary to oppose the Austrian action and he did not yield until, on March 23, 1909, a démarche of the German government made it clear that the latter would support the Hapsburg monarchy.

This study of Russo-German relations opens immediately after the Bosnian crisis when, as a result of the German action, Russia's anger at Germany was equal to, if not greater than, her anger at Austria. During the five years which are studied, German policy had for its cornerstone the determination to maintain Austria-Hungary as a great power. To this was added the wish to maintain the territorial integrity of Turkey, and, as a means to both ends, the German government desired the friendship of Russia and was willing to support any solution of the Balkan question on which both Austria and Russia could agree. To avoid a conflict with Russia in the Balkans, it also attempted to interest the former in the Far East. In the same period, the policy of the Russian government was directed toward the maintenance of its alliance with France, the strengthening of the Entente with Great Britain, the increase of its own military strength, and the endeavor to retain its position as the leader of the small Slavic states in the Balkans and to protect its interests at the Straits. It desired the friendship of Germany, not only because it feared the latter's military might, but also because it wished her to restrain Austria from an aggressive policy in the Balkans.

Until Izvolsky's resignation as foreign minister in Sep-

tember, 1910, the Russian government was principally concerned with a recovery from its diplomatic humiliation in the Bosnian crisis. Because of Izvolsky's bitter personal animosity toward Aehrenthal, negotiations with Austria were extremely difficult and those with Germany only less so. The latter had wished to counteract the impression that Berlin had exercised pressure on St. Petersburg in the last phase of the Bosnian crisis by the publication of certain documents relative to that incident, but Izvolsky would not consent to this, and the relations between the two powers were only slightly improved by the meeting of the tsar and the kaiser in June, 1909. In October of that year, Izvolsky retrieved Russian prestige somewhat by concluding the Racconigi agreement with the Italian government, by which both countries agreed to preserve the status quo in the Balkans and to assist in the development of the Balkan states according to the principle of nationality. Furthermore, Russia recognized Italy's interests in Tripoli and Italy promised to support Russia on the question of the Straits. Although Austria was greatly irritated by this action of Italy (with whom she was in the process of negotiating an agreement on the Balkans) both she and Germany decided not to press the question because they did not wish to endanger the Triple Alliance by a quarrel with Italy and they did not believe that Russia was planning any immediate action in the Balkans. Finally, in March, 1910, the last official trace of the Bosnian crisis was removed by the publication of a communiqué in the press announcing the resumption of normal diplomatic relations between Russia and Austria.

The greatest improvement in Russo-German relations before the Great War resulted from the meeting of the tsar and the kaiser at Potsdam in November, 1910, and the conversations which took place at that time between Bethmann-Hollweg, the German chancellor, Alfred von Kiderlen-Wächter, the new secretary of state in the German foreign office, and S. D. Sazonov, who had succeeded Izvolsky as Russian foreign minister. Kiderlen-Wächter was popularly believed to be the strongest man in the German foreign service and, although he agreed with the chancellor in the latter's determination to maintain Austria as a great power, he wished to cultivate the friendship of Russia as a means of restraining his ally from an adventurous policy in the Balkans. Sazonov was influenced by a similar desire; convinced that Russia needed time

to recover from her disastrous war with Japan and from the revolution, he was willing to purchase Germany's friendship at the price of considerable concessions in regard to the Bagdad Railway.

The Anglo-Russian convention of 1907, which recognized Russia's predominant interests in northern Persia, had also provided for the maintenance of the open door in that country, but the policy of the Russian government in Persia led to frequent violations of that principle. In 1910 the German government determined to use the question of the maintenance of the open door as a lever to force Russia to withdraw her opposition to the Bagdad Railway. Since 1907 the Entente powers had taken the position that they would discuss the question of their attitude toward that project only as a group of three states dealing with a fourth (à quatre), but, in May, 1910, St. Petersburg had agreed to enter into direct negotiations with Berlin. The Potsdam meeting was the scene of these negotiations and the German government also used this opportunity to secure from Russia some statement with regard to its political relations to England.

This latter problem was Kiderlen's principal interest. Germany declared that she would not support Austria in an aggressive policy in the Balkans and Russia stated that she would not join any anti-German combination which England might seek to form. In spite of the desire of the German government for an exchange of notes embodying these statements, Sazonov would not agree to this procedure, but the tsar gave his word that Russia would adhere to the policy enunciated at Potsdam. After prolonged negotiations, the railroad question was settled more successfully; in August, 1911, in return for a German agreement not to seek concessions in the Russian sphere in Persia, the Russian government promised to build a railroad from Teheran to Khanikin which would connect the Persian and Bagdad Railways.

As a result of this agreement Russia protected her position in Persia and secured an assurance in regard to Austrian policy in the Balkans, and Germany got not only the Russian consent to the Bagdad Railway and the connection of the Bagdad and Persian lines, but, also, a reassurance with regard to Russian policy in Europe. The Entente powers, who were not informed by Sazonov of the political assurance he had given at Potsdam, were, however, considerably disturbed by his willingness to depart from negotiations à quatre with regard to the Bagdad Railway, but,

once he had made his promises at Potsdam, they believed that the failure of the negotiations concerning Persia and the railroads would be politically disastrous and they did not oppose the conclusion of the final agreement.

The attempt of the German government to interest Russia in the Far East and, thus, distract her from European problems was not successful. The latter had marked out northern Manchuria and eastern Mongolia as her sphere of influence and had strengthened her position there by conventions with Japan and Mongolia. To protect these interests further, Russia demanded the right to veto any loans which might affect her position in Manchuria, Mongolia, and Chinese Turkestan. Germany, which was a member of the four-power financial consortium for loans to China, insisted on the maintenance of the open door in that country and was opposed to the recognition of any Russian special interests. This dispute was not settled until 1912, when Russian bankers were admitted to the consortium and it was stipulated that, if any power objected to the purpose of a particular loan, it could withdraw from the consortium. Thus, since the German government was unwilling to give Russia a free hand in any part of China, it did not succeed in diverting her from European affairs, but gained only the negative blessing of preventing isolated Russian action in China.

The failure of this attempt to turn Russia's attention to the Far East is shown by her policy after the reopening of the Near Eastern question in 1911. During the Turco-Italian war over Tripoli, the Russian government attempted to make use of Turkey's difficulties to secure the free passage of Russian warships through the Straits in return for a guarantee of Turkish territory and an agreement to discuss the question of the capitulations and the Anatolian railroads. The German government pursued a policy of great reserve with regard to this question, not because it was willing to agree to the Russian proposal, but because it believed that the British government would oppose this and that it was not necessary for Germany to become embroiled with Russia on this issue. Actually, for reasons which are not completely clear, Sazonov disavowed the negotiations at Constantinople, and the question of the Straits was not raised again.

The status quo in the Balkans had been preserved in the past not only by the rivalry of the great powers there, but also

by the inability of the Balkan states to co-operate. In March, 1912, this situation was changed by the conclusion of an alliance between Bulgaria and Serbia, with the support and assistance of Russia, and, when Greece and Montenegro associated themselves with the two allies, the Balkan bloc was formed. Sazonov realized the danger that such an alliance might become aggressive, but he believed that the Russian government could not afford to oppose the formation of such a bloc and that, if it had the right to advise and arbitrate between the Balkan states, it could control their policy. In this he was mistaken. The half-hearted attempts of the great powers to prevent a war were not successful and, when the Balkan allies attacked Turkey in October, 1912, the only action taken by the powers was to agree that they would localize the war and would permit no changes in the territorial status quo in the Balkans.

By the organization of the Conference of Ambassadors, which met in London from December, 1912, to August, 1913, the powers were able to localize the war, but the unexpected military success of the Balkan allies made it impossible to maintain the territorial status quo, and the enforced sacrifice of this principle resulted in a prolonged struggle between Austria and Russia over the division of territory in the Balkans. The German government gave its full support to the Austrian demands that an independent Albania should be created and Serbia excluded from the Adriatic. Although Berlin frequently urged Vienna to make any possible concessions to St. Petersburg, and to avoid a war, she never gave Vienna any reason to doubt that, if war came, she would fight for Austria's vital interests. As a result of this German support, and of the inability of Russia to take military action, Sazonov was forced to accept the creation of an independent Albania, to support the demand of the powers that the new state annex Scutari, and to inform Serbia that she must be satisfied with commercial rather than territorial access to the Adriatic.

Before the first Balkan war ended in May, 1913, quarrels had broken out between the small states. Because she had been deprived of a port on the Adriatic, Serbia demanded a revision of the territorial division set forth in her treaty with Bulgaria and, at the same time, Rumania demanded that Bulgaria compensate her for her neutrality. The Russian and German governments sup-

ported a settlement of the latter dispute by which the powers awarded Rumania the town of Silistria, but even though, in an attempt to preserve the Balkan alliance, Russia was willing to accept the onerous task of arbitrating between Serbia and Bulgaria, this quarrel proved insoluble, and war broke out between the Balkan allies in June, 1913.

The second Balkan war shows the sharp divergence between German and Austrian policy in the Balkans. The Austrian government believed that it was impossible to secure a rapprochement with Serbia and it wished to win the friendship of Bulgaria and destroy the existing Balkan alliance. The German government constantly urged Vienna to improve its relations with Belgrade and, since it considered Bulgaria an unreliable ally, advised Austria not to run the risk of alienating Rumania by its support of Bulgaria. This disagreement prevented Austria from securing a revision of the Treaty of Bucharest, signed in August, 1913, for the benefit of Bulgaria.

The Balkan Wars increased the strain between Russia and Germany. The Russian government had contributed to this when it sponsored the Balkan alliance, because this alliance was the basic reason for the reopening of the Near Eastern question. The principal reason why war did not result from this crisis was the military weakness of the Russian Empire, but the realization of her own impotence at this time resulted in Russia's determination to increase her strength and did not, in the long run, aid the cause of peace. The German government had also helped to increase the tension in its relations with Russia by its determination to support Austria in the protection of what the latter considered to be her vital interests. Moreover, when, in October, 1913, the Austrian government sent an ultimatum to Serbia demanding the evacuation of Albanian territory, the German government supported this isolated action.

The problems, which, after the Treaty of Bucharest, confronted Germany and Russia in Turkey, in the Balkans, and in Europe only served to increase the tension between them. Both governments wished to preserve the territorial integrity of Turkey, at least for the time being but, whereas Russia had decided that, if Turkey collapsed, she would seize the Straits, Germany was not certain that any territorial partition of Turkey would protect her interests there so successfully as the maintenance

and strengthening of a Turkish government friendly to her.

Consequently when, in the summer of 1913, the Russian government proposed a plan for the reform of the Armenian vilayets of the Ottoman Empire, the German government interpreted this plan as a veiled attempt to partition Turkey and combined with the Porte to secure the adoption of a more restricted program of reform. The German policy in regard to Armenian reforms convinced Russia that Germany was her principal opponent in Turkey and this conviction was deepened by the crisis over the German military mission to Turkey. Berlin had agreed, in the spring of 1913, to send a military mission, the leader of which would be a member of the Turkish Supreme War Council and the commander of the First Army Corps, located at Constantinople. The tsar had been informed of the mission in May, 1913, but it was not until November that the Russian government learned that General Liman von Sanders, who had been selected to lead the mission, would command the First Army Corps.

Sazonov immediately protested against the command of a German general at Constantinople but, since neither his protests nor the conversations in Berlin of Kokovtsov, the Russian minister president, with the kaiser and the chancellor bore any fruit, he appealed to the Entente powers to support him at Constantinople and Berlin. Both France and England hesitated to do this, not only because Germany had made it plain that she would not yield to pressure from the Entente powers, but also because they had learned that the German general would not have authority over the Straits or over Constantinople, and that his powers were no greater than those of the British admiral who was adviser to the Turkish navy.

The crisis was not ended until the German government, which was disturbed by the criticisms in Russia of Sazonov's policy and feared that he might be dismissed as foreign minister, persuaded the kaiser to raise Liman to the rank of general of cavalry. This automatically gave him the rank of Turkish marshal and removed him from the command of the First Army Corps. The Russian government accepted this solution, although Sazonov maintained his contention that the German government had been well aware of the nature of Russia's interests at the Straits and that the final solution did not represent a German concession to Russia but was nothing more than she should have done in the first place.

The Liman von Sanders crisis had made the Russian government painfully aware of its military weakness. Two special conferences, in January and February, 1914, of the officials of the war, navy, and foreign offices, had revealed the fact that Russia was not strong enough to seize the Straits and that, only in the event of a European war, could she hope to obtain control of them.

In the Balkans, both Germany and Russia were interested in the diplomatic realignment of the small states. St. Petersburg continued its support of Serbia although it cautioned her not to push the question of union with Montenegro at the moment for fear of Austrian opposition. It attempted to re-establish its influence in Bulgaria by persuading the French government to refuse a loan to that state until it promised to follow a policy friendly to Russia, but its efforts in this direction failed because Austria was able to secure a loan for Bulgaria in Germany. The greatest success of Russian diplomacy was in Rumania and, after his conversations with the Rumanian statesmen in June, 1914, Sazonov was convinced that that country was not bound to support Austria in every war, but that she would follow her own interests and attempt to pick the winning side.

Until the eve of the Great War Berlin continued to urge Vienna to improve its relations with Serbia and to retain the friendship of Rumania. To a large extent both of these policies failed and this accounts for the fact that the German government was willing to support the negotiations for a loan to Bulgaria.

The German statesmen were convinced that the balance of power in Europe had been altered by the Balkan Wars in a manner unfavorable to them and they, therefore, decided to increase their military preparations. In April, 1913, a bill was introduced in the reichstag to increase the peace-time strength of the army and, as a justification for this measure, the chancellor referred to the insecurity in Europe as a result of the Balkan Wars, and to the danger of a war between the Germans and the Slavs. As a result of this German measure, the Russian government negotiated a large loan in France for the construction of strategic railroads in western Russia and continued its efforts to strengthen its army and decrease the time necessary for mobilization. The fear created by this armament race was intensified by provocative articles in the press on military preparations and by criticisms, in the press and in the legislatures of both countries, of the

existing commercial treaty.

These polemics became so virulent in March, 1914, that there was a reaction in Russia and Count Witte, the former minister of finance, and certain members of the court circle, where pro-German sentiment had always been strong, began to advocate a rapprochement with Germany. Sazonov, who was under fire from the pan-Slavs for not supporting their cause and from the pro-German group for his opposition to German policy in Turkey and in the Balkans, determined to protect his own position and policy by tightening the bonds of the Entente. It was impossible to get an alliance with England but, with the support of the French government, he secured the consent of the British government to the negotiation of a naval convention. Although no progress was made in this before the outbreak of the war, the negotiations became known to the German government and confirmed its belief that Russia had gone over to the camp of its enemies.

The collapse of Russo-German friendship was due, in the first place, to the fact that the problems which concerned the two powers were never settled on their own merits but were dealt with in relation to the existing framework of alliances; this was true in 1909 and it remained true in 1914. The preservation of the Hapsburg monarchy and of the Austro-German alliance is the red thread running through all of German foreign policy. In spite of the fact that Germany attempted to prevent the development of a crisis between Austria and Russia which might lead to war, her entire policy during the Balkan Wars left no room for doubt that, if war came, she would fight on the side of Austria.

Moreover, by 1914, the German government had drifted into the dangerous policy of accepting the Austrian interpretation of the program which should be pursued in the Balkans. For two years before the Great War, the German government had urged Austria to seek a rapprochement with Serbia but, by the spring of 1914, there are indications that it had accepted the Austrian belief that such a rapprochement was impossible. Once the German government adopted the view that the settlement of the southern Slav question, in the manner desired by Austria, was essential not only to Austria but also to Germany, it became impossible to maintain Russo-German friendship. This decision was not taken until July, 1914, but the German government had been slowly moving towards it during the five preceding years.

So long as the German government held to this attitude, the policy pursued by Russia in the Balkans and at the Straits was, in its final sense, provocative, because it threw Russia perpetually into opposition to Austria and Germany. Only if the status quo were maintained could Russo-German friendship be preserved, because that friendship crossed the boundaries of the alliances and, hence, was more dependent than any other international relation in Europe on the preservation of the existing balance of power.

In the second place, it is apparent from the study of these five years that, though the statesmen were aware of the dangers inherent in the system of alliances, they made few constructive attempts to remove them, and none of these was successful. The meetings between the rulers were an attempt to preserve the principle of monarchical solidarity but they were of little value, because foreign policy was not determined to any decisive extent by the desires of the monarchs. Furthermore, the attempt of Germany to interest Russia in the Far East failed because Germany was unwilling to give Russia a free hand in northern China, and nothing less than a free hand would have assured her absorption there.

The military weakness of Russia was an important contributing factor to the maintenance of her friendship with Germany. At every time when Russian and German policy clashed the Russian government had been unable to enforce its desires by any other than diplomatic means. This fact had been brought home to the Russian statesmen by the events of the Balkan Wars and, even more acutely, by the Liman von Sanders crisis. At that time Russia faced the painful fact that, if the German government attempted to establish its control over Turkey and the Straits, she could not prevent this by military means. Consequently, although the tsar's government did not desire war with Germany, it adopted a series of military measures which were designed to prepare it for just such a war.

Finally, the diplomacy of both Germany and Russia from 1909 to 1914 shows an anarchical lack of direction and control, and an inability to realize the probable--in fact, the almost inevitable--result of the course of action they were pursuing. Hence, although none of the statesmen desired war, the lack of leaders of sufficient intelligence and courage to formulate a

policy which would have led to peace rather than to war, and of sufficient strength to mold public opinion in support of that policy, made war more likely.

William II undoubtedly preferred the gold braid of a dress uniform to the dirty garb of a soldier in the front line trenches but, since William had never seen men in the trenches, his great weakness was a tendency to rattle the saber at times of diplomatic tension. His sin was irresponsibility rather than intrigue but, when he had once made up his mind that Russo-German friendship was dead, that Russia was planning to attack Germany, that irresponsibility became dangerous. Although Bethmann-Hollweg sincerely desired peace, he was not vigorous enough to formulate a new foreign policy and he was unable to dominate the kaiser, his colleagues at the foreign office, or the German people.

There was an equal lack of leadership in Russia. No man hated the whole task of ruling more than Nicholas II and, as a result, the anarchy in the Russian government was even greater than the anarchy in the German. The direction of foreign policy was made more difficult by the fact that Russia was passing through a period of constitutional reform and that the duma, however weak, was, nonetheless, an organ for the expression of criticisms of that policy. Izvolsky was a man of intelligence and energy, but he did not receive strong or consistent support from the tsar, and he lost the confidence of all the statesmen of Europe during the Bosnian crisis. Sazonov did not share Izvolsky's reputation for intrigue but, unfortunately, he did not share his energy either. He had many of William II's weaknesses without the latter's vigorous personality. He was mediocre in ability and vacillating in policy. He wanted certain things for Russia but he was totally unwilling and unable to study the political situation in the cold light of reality and decide just how much he could get. These traits combined to make him, in spite of his desire for peace, a dangerous foreign minister.

With leaders who were too weak to insist that the system of alliances should be used only for defense, and who allowed it to change until it became a Frankenstein, demanding the pursuit of power politics, it is not surprising that the people in both Russia and Germany drifted into a state of mind which prepared them for war. In 1914 they did not want war, but, like the statesmen, they felt themselves coerced by an imperative neces-

sity to prepare for war and, like children, they taunted each other with their strength. Thus, because the governments had decided their problems, not on their individual merits, but in relation to the system of alliances, because they had failed to avoid a conflict of interest in Europe and, instead, had had recourse to increasing armaments to protect those interests, and because their leaders lacked the courage and ability to evolve a less dangerous system of international order, Russia and Germany found themselves at war with each other in 1914.